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GREEN BRANCHES
BY JAMES STEPHENS

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GREEN BRANCHES

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BY JAMES STEPHENS

NEW EDITION

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AUTUMN

1915

I

It may be on a quiet mountain-top,
Or in a valley folded among hills
You take your path, and often you will stop
To hear the pleasant chatter of the rills,
The piping of a wind in branches green,
The murmuring of widely-lifted spray
As long boughs swing ;
And hear the twittering
Of drowsy birds when the great sun is seen
Climbing the steep horizon to the day.

The lovely moon trailing her silver dress
By quiet waters. Each living star
Moving apart in holy quietness,
Sphere over golden sphere moving afar,
These I can see ;
And the unquiet zone

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Rolling in snow along the edge of sight.
The world is very fair, and I am free
To see its beauty, and to be
In solitude, and quite forget, and quite
Lose out of memory all I have known
Of everything but this.

II

Straying apart in sad and mournful way,
Alone, or with my heart for company,
Keeping the tone of a dejected day,
And a bewilderment that came to me ;
I said—The Spring
Will never come again, and there is end
Of everything—
Day after day
The sap will ebb away from the great tree,
And when the sap is gone
Then piteously
She tumbles to the clay :
And we say only—Such a one
Had pleasant shade, but there is end of her—

And you, and even you, the year
Will drain and dry, and you will disappear.

AUTUMN 1915

Then to my heart there came so wild a stir,
And such great pity and astonishment,
And such a start of fear and woe had I,
That where I went I did not know,
And only this did know,
That you could die.

III

I would have liked to sing from fuller throat
To you who sang so well, but here I stay
Resting the music on a falling note,
And hear it die away and die away,
With beauty unrehearsed, and life and love
Unsung.

For I had clung,
With what of laughter and of eagerness,
Unto the hope that I might chance to be
The maker of a music nothing less
Than those great poets of antiquity,
Who sang of clouds and winds, of hills and clods,
Of trees and streams, and of the mind of man ;
And chaunted too the universal gods,
And their high guardianship since time began ;
And did not fail before a theme although
It passed the reason.

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IV

I heard a bird sing in the woods to-day
A failing song.
The times had caught on him.
In autumn boughs he tried a wonted lay,
And was abashed to find his music grim
As the crow's song.
Then, when I raised an air
To comfort him,
I wretched was to hear
The crow did croak and chatter everywhere
Inside my ear.

And so, behold,
I am a saddened elf;
And, as a deer
Flies timidly to shade,
I fly to laughter and I hide myself,
And couch me in the coverts that I made
Against those bold ambitions, and forswear
The palm, the prize, or what instead of gear
A poet gets with his appointed share
Of beer and bread.

AUTUMN 1915

v

Upon the grass I drop this tuneful reed,
And turn from it aside, and turn from more
That I had fancied to be mine indeed
Beyond all reclamation. See the door
Set in the boundary wall yawns windily,
It will be shut when I have wandered through,
And open will no more again for me
This side of life whatever thing I do.

And so good-bye, and so good-night to you,
And farewell all. Behold the lifted hand,
And the long last look upon the view,
And the last glimpse of that most lovely land.
And thus away unto the mundane sphere,
And look not back again nor turn anew,
And hear no more that laughter at the ear,
And sing no more for you.

SPRING

1916

I

Do not forget my charge, I beg of you ;
That of what flowers you find of fairest hue
And sweetest odour you do gather those
Are best of all the best—a fragrant rose,
A tall calm lily from the waterside,
A half-blown poppy leaning at the side
Its graceful head to dream among the corn,
Forget-me-nots that seem as though the morn
Had tumbled down and grew into the clay,
And hawthorn buds that swing along the way
Easing the hearts of those who pass them by
Until they find contentment—Do not cry,
But gather buds, and with them greenery
Of slender branches taken from a tree
Well bannered by the Spring that saw them fall:
Then you, for you are cleverest of all
Who have slim fingers and are pitiful,

GREEN BRANCHES

Brimming your lap with bloom that you may cull,
Will sit apart, and weave for every head
A garland of the flowers you gatheréd.

II

Be green upon their graves, O happy Spring,
For they were young and eager who are dead ;
Of all things that are young and quivering
With eager life be they rememberéd :
They move not here, they have gone to the clay,
They cannot die again for liberty ;
Be they remembered of their land for aye ;
Green be their graves and green their memory.

Fragrance and beauty come in with the green
The ragged bushes put on sweet attire,
The birds forget how chill these airs have been,
The clouds bloom out again and live in fire ;
Blue is the dawn of day, calm is the lake,
And merry sounds are fitful in the thorn ;
In covert deep the young blackbirds awake,
They shake their wings and sing upon the morn.

SPRING 1916

At springtime of the year you came and swung
Green flags above the newly-greening earth ;
Scarce were the leaves unfolded, they were young,
Nor had outgrown the wrinkles of their birth :
Comrades they thought you of their pleasant
hour,
They had but glimpsed the sun when they saw
you ;
They heard your songs e'er birds had singing
power,
And drank your blood e'er that they drank the
dew.

Then you went down, and then, and as in pain,
The Spring affrighted fled her leafy ways,
The clouds came to the earth in gusty rain,
And no sun shone again for many days :
And day by day they told that one was dead,
And day by day the season mourned for you,
Until that count of woe was finishéd,
And Spring remembered all was yet to do.

She came with mirth of wind and eager leaf,
With scampering feet and reaching out of wings,

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She laughed among the boughs and banished
grief,
And cared again for all her baby things ;
Leading along the joy that has to be,
Bidding her timid buds think on the May,
And told that Summer comes—with victory,
And told the hope that is all creatures' stay.

Go Winter now unto your own abode,
Your time is done, and Spring is conqueror,
Lift up with all your gear and take your road,
For she is here and brings the sun with her :
Now are we resurrected, now are we,
Who lay so long beneath an icy hand,
New-risen into life and liberty,
Because the Spring is come into our land.

III

In other lands they may,
With public joy or dole along the way,
With pomp and pageantry and loud lament
Of drums and trumpets, and with merriment
Of grateful hearts, lead into rest and sted
The nation's dead.

SPRING 1916

If we had drums and trumpets, if we had
Aught of heroic pitch or accent glad
To honour you as bids tradition old,
With banners flung or draped in mournful fold,
And pacing cortège ; these would we not bring
For your last journeying.

We have no drums or trumpets ; naught have we
But some green branches taken from a tree,
And flowers that grow at large in mead and vale ;
Nothing of choice have we, or of avail
To do you honour as our honour deems,
And as your worth beseems.

Sleep drums and trumpets yet a little time ;
All ends and all begins, and there is chime
At last where discord was, and joy at last
Where woe wept out her eyes. Be not downcast,
Here is prosperity and goodly cheer,
For life does follow death, and death is here.

JOY BE WITH US

Joy be with us, and honour close the tale ;
Now do we dip the prow, and shake the sail,
And take the wind, and bid adieu to rest.

With glad endeavour we begin the quest
That destiny commands, though where we go,
Or guided by what star, no man doth know.

Uncharted is our course, our hearts untried,
And we may weary e'er we take the tide,
Or make fair haven from the moaning sea.

Be ye propitious, winds of destiny,
On us at first blow not too boisterous bold ;
All Ireland hath is packed into this hold,
Her hopes flies at the peak. Now it is dawn,
And we away. Be with us Mananaun.

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